

The Image of the Victim and Victimizer in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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ABSTRACT

The images of the victim and victimizer have been represented by many forms in literature—old and modern. As to their appearance in literature, one can say that they have appeared since the dwelling of man on earth and since the horrible murder done by the brutal, vicious killer and a cunning, violent and demonic Cain against his innocent brother Abel as it is revealed in the heavenly books. Hence, the tendency of aggressiveness has accompanied man since his creation. Aggressiveness has assumed many characters—social, political, economic, political and capitalistic. On the social and political level, characters are depicted in Laila Halabi's novel *Once in a Promised Land* as victims of the 9/11 attack made against the World Trade Center in New York that is located in two towers already destroyed. The aftermath of the event has created many and various problems to people especially those Arab Muslims living in the US at the time when the catastrophe occurred. This research paper revolves around the theme of victim and victimizer to illustrate to what extent the victimizers have been cruel and vicious and to what extent the victims are innocent. Meanwhile the paper makes significant touches upon the psychological aspects of both of the victim and the victimizer as represented in *Once in a Promised Land*. It also points out that innocent people are often attacked by the malicious in one way or another due to the fact that the nature of man is the same at all times—good or evil. This novel has been a reaction against those novels that have already distorted the character of the Arab Muslims living in the US. It is a kind of justification that the Arab Muslim character can by no means be deformed at all. The protagonists have been alienated from the people whom they are to deal with, so they decide to return to their country which they have come from.

KEYWORDS: *The Image*, *Victim*, *Victimizer*, *Laila Halaby*, *Promised Land*

Once in a Promised Land has been inspired by the aftermaths of the 9/11 attack. It has been that the attack was made by a group of Arab Muslims as the American media has alleged. Hence, the Arabs and Muslims living in America have been regarded as being doubtful accomplices in that action. Hence, being vulnerable, the Arab Muslims living in America have to suffer from the reaction of the American society trying to find out what may soften their rage. In *Once in a Promised Land*, the novelist has set the action of the novel in the place and at the time of that attack. The protagonists, Jassim and Salwa Haddad, a couple of a Jordanian husband and Palestinian wife, find themselves living in Tucson where they have to endure the effects of the aftermaths. On the other hand, suspicions about Jassim have not only inflicted his character as an

Arab Muslim, but also as hydrologist when his work has been suspected and he becomes the subject of an interrogation.

After the 9/11 attack, the American society and novelists as well try to describe the Arab Muslims in opprobrious terms. The latter are considered the 'Others' and enemies of the American society: "Beautifully observed and startlingly real, Halaby manages to say much about the immigrant experience while in the process exposing the darker side of American society, where prejudice and discrimination can often appear where you least expect it, even in the highest echelons of government" (Review, 2007).

The couple lives comfortably inasmuch they have jobs that are well-paying. Their life in the US seems to be much better than that which they have already lived in Jordan. Jassim is mainly concerned with his career a hydrologist and with swimming as well, whereas Salwa works as a banker and is more concerned with luxury. Moreover, they have to endeavor to maintain their identity. But their state of life becomes vulnerable, being prone to cracking due to the suffering from the burden of physical and mental distress due to the American society's abuse against them: "The book works best when Halaby is describing an overzealous government and citizenry fueled by paranoia and a desire for quick action, though some of the suspecting people, described in the book as right-wing evangelical Christians, come off as one-dimensional villains" (PopMatters Staff, 2007).

Despite the fact that they lead an American kind of life as any other American does, Jassim and Salwa are now regarded foreign people in a country that is inimical to the Arabs and Muslims and the like of them. They have been taken aback by the attack which the Americans think it has been done by a group of Arabs and Muslims, so their dream to enjoy comfortable life vanishes into the air. In the meantime, Salwa considers her previous life in her indigenous country a world of corruption. It appears that Salaw and Jassim become victims of circumstances facing them in a foreign land where they have been despised by the American society for a crime which they have not committed at all. *Once in a Promised Land* shows that the novelist attempts to draw the attention of the public to the fact that the Arab Muslims living in America have nothing to deal with calamity that has befallen the country, which causes the American society and writers to look down at them with disrespect:

Halaby inverts the Western gaze upon the Arab world; in doing so, she represents an America that is conspiratorial and inundated with religious zealotry. After 9/11, Halaby's American characters become increasingly intolerant and

distrustful of Arabs and Islamic cultures. Halaby, then, portrays intolerant and xenophobic American characters overwrought with suspicion and paranoia and reveals a post 9/11 America that is rife with anti-Arab racism.

(Amenda Lloyd, 2012, p. iv)

Besides, Salwa has made an illicit relationship with a disloyal worker and bears a child which she hides from her husband who does not want children. This matter has been unfolded when she miscarries. Another circumstantial effect on Jassim is that he hit an American teenager by his car and is then left to face his destiny concerning this matter. As a matter of fact, Salwa becomes victim to her sexual impulses, which pervades to one of the naturalistic elements that sex is a determining factor in one's life. Hence, Salwa and Jassim have hands in the devastation of their good yet innocent life. They appear to be the victims of some tragic events that have changed the course of the development of their lives. They have come to live in America where they could find comfort and a good life, but the opposite happens:

The post 9/11 moment finds Jassim and Salwa alienated from the lifestyle to which they were once accustomed and estranged from one another; consequently, their marriage begins to fall apart. In spite of the challenges facing her central characters after the attacks, Halaby's novel draws more attention to the shortcomings of the American individuals who interact with her Arab American protagonists than it does to the identity challenges facing the protagonists themselves.

(Amenda Lloyd, 2012, p. iv)

Being an American Arab novelist, Halaby realistically witnessed the effects of the 9/11 attack on the Arab Muslims living in America. She depicts the characters concerned in a realistic manner insofar as she has been a true witness of their sufferings: "Halaby...places her protagonists, a well-off Arab couple living in Tucson, in that moment to explore the effect on their lives of hijackers' flying planes into buildings on the other side of the country" (PopMatters Staff, 2007). Hence, Salma and Jassim can be regarded as realistic representation of the victims of that attack who have been treated in a bad way. They and the like of them have been stereotyped as characters within the domain of the terrorists and the fanatic at the time they are not terrorists or fanatic, whose feeling towards the attack has been one similar to any other American person's feeling in this regard. In this respect, the American society that condemns Salwa and Jassim should be blamed for this kind of behavior towards the Arab Muslims. for the American society can be regarded as being the victimizer of the Arab Muslims, the oppressed victims: "In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, being an Arab and a Muslim in America meant being a potential target of

suspicion, vulnerable to backlash from an angry public looking for outlets for its fear or rage” (PopMatters Staff, 2007).

Once in a Promised Land envisions the dream of Arab Muslim husband and wife to spend their lives in the United States, whose character has been deformed by society due to an attack which they have not committed at all. The indictment attached to them has been made simply because they have been stereotyped as fundamentalists whereas they are not. Their dream has not been fulfilled because of the circumstances that have afflicted their position in society. They have dreamed of continuing their lives in the new land, America, but they have been turned into victims of their oppressors. Instead of becoming ordinary citizens of the US, they have been classified as being fundamentalists that can by no means be excluded from the domain of the Other: “However acclimated they are to American life, Jassim and Salwa are foreigners in a land now hostile to people who look like they do. As their American dream life is pulled out from under them, Salwa decides their adopted country is too crass and corrupt to live there anymore. Halaby describes her realization” (PopMatters Staff, 2007).

As a structural point to be found in the novel, it must be noted that the fact that there is a contrast between two situations: the situation in which the protagonists enjoy a happy life and have jobs eligible enough to let them live a good life before the 9/11 attack, and the situation in which they find themselves hated yet alienated by the American society due to the notion that they have been considered and stereotyped as being fanatic. To add to their calamity, they have to undergo the interrogation made by the FBI, which greatly affects their psychological state. Moreover, Salwa in particular has been oppressed despite the fact that she is a US-born citizen:

When placed in a post 9/11 milieu, Halaby's Arab American characters become increasingly aware that many Americans have adopted the oppositional discourse propagated by the rhetoric of U.S. politicians at the onset of the war on terror, which aggravated the American misperception of Arabic and Islamic immigrants already in existence prior to the 9/11 attacks. (Lloyd, 2012, p. 2)

Hence, *Once in a Promised Land* is an attempt to counteract the American society's point of view concerning the Arab Muslims that have been stereotyped as being fundamentalists due to racism and fanaticism of the American society and its political system that gives rise to such a culture negative to the Arab Muslims' aspirations to live a peaceful life in America. The Occident constantly shows enmity towards the Orient in that it considers it inferior to it in every aspect of life. The image of the Other as being inferior and inimical has been nailed in the minds of the

Americans. Interestingly enough, it is the American society that is characterized by extremist fanaticism and fundamentalism, together with social discrimination, not the innocent Arab people. From the psychological point of view and according to Freud's maxim of projection, the Americans want to distance themselves from all those crimes done against humanity; they attribute their corruption to the Other that is represented by the Arab Muslims. The idea of projection can be further detailed as follows:

Psychological projection is a defense mechanism people subconsciously employ in order to cope with difficult feelings or emotions. Psychological projection involves projecting undesirable feelings or emotions onto someone else, rather than admitting to or dealing with the unwanted feelings....Freud noticed that they would sometimes accuse others of having the same feelings they themselves were demonstrating. By engaging in this behavior, the patient was better able to deal with the emotions he or she was experiencing....The classic example of Freudian projection is that of a woman who has been unfaithful to her husband but who accuses her husband of cheating on her. Another example of psychological projection is someone who feels a compulsion to steal things then projects those feelings onto others.

(Jennifer Beaman, (2017).

Salwa and Jassim can be regarded as a salient specimen of the American Arab Muslims struggling after the 9/11 attacks which have been of a great contribution to increasing the detestation, hatred and enmity against them. As a matter of fact, in *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby manages to show to the public that the American Arab Muslims must not have been dealt in the way the Americans do because they are downright innocent people; they are innocent people behaving like any other innocent people, having the feelings similar to the Americans' towards any catastrophe that may affect the American life. They have nothing to deal with extremism, fanaticism, or fundamentalism.

The moral lesson to be inferred from this novel is to say that the American society has been made double dealing and is characterized by trickery and fraud to the extent that they do not care for creating afflictions to what they consider to be the Other. Doubts and suspicions have inflicted the Arab Muslims, which unfolds the fact that the Americans are anti-Arab racists after the 9/11 attacks.

Interestingly enough, to accuse innocent people, as it is generally accepted, is prohibited by religions whatsoever, for Jassim and Salwa can by no means be accused of any crime at the time

they have committed no evil deeds as far as the 9/11 attacks are concerned. According to the Islamic tradition, “No burdened soul can carry the burden of another” (Holy Qur’an, 35: 18). Hence, Jassim and Salwa are not responsible for the collapse of the aforementioned towers. But they have become the victims of the American way of thinking. Besides, according to the Jewish tradition, “innocents are not punished” (Broyde, 1998, p. 2). In addition to this discussion, it may be further shown that the Bible declares dogmatic representations in line with the aforementioned religions’ points of view. Therefore, Salwa and Jassim are made the victims of both society and the political system of the country that do not care for religious and moral representations. Furthermore, it is indicated in the Bible that everyone will suffer for their own sins only and not the sins of others “The Bible clearly says that everyone will suffer for their own sin only and not the sins of others” (Ezekiel 18). Hence, the dream of Salwa and Jassim has not been fulfilled due to powers of evil, the victimizers, that are beyond their control and that are represented by the American society’s point of view concerning the entire group of the Arab Muslims living in the US. Despite the fact that Jassim works for the welfare of the US as far as researches in the field of water supplies are concerned, he is made a terrorist and should leave the country.

As it is indicated in the hatred against the Arab Muslims, there seems to be an inimical standpoint on the part of the American society against them. This can be regarded as an attempt to deform their identity when they consider them the Other or the enemy of the people that should by one way or another be eliminated from the US. This kind of the American culture has been reflected in the American literature; especially the post-9/11 -attacks fictional arts. For example, this inimical attitude has been reflected in John Updike’s *Terrorist* and John DeLillo’s *Falling Man* due to their racial aspirations: “At worst, Updike is accused of racial profiling” (Peter C. Herman, 2015, p. 691), and at the same time, Updike has accused the Arab Muslims as being racists trying to show their enmity to the Occident: “it gives an insight into how terrorism has been attached and connotes to Muslims and Arabs after the said 9/11 attack. Updike’s *Terrorist* might be viewed as non-traditional in depicting Arab-Muslims character, but it shows that terrorism is inherent to Islamists movements; which supports and advocates Islamic fundamentalism” (Malik Oufi Jasim Al-Maliki1, 2019, p. 1491). It can further be noted that DeLillo presents his themes concerning the victims of the fall of the two towers and attributes their fall and the demises to the American Arab Muslims so that the latter are to be accused of being the Others inimical to the American society while they are innocent. He employs the image of the falling man to be put on the title page of his book so as to evoke pity and compassion on the part of the readers and reinforce his thesis that the American Arab Muslims should be condemned by a large number of

people. Hence, the Arab Muslims are not only condemned and victimized by society but also by the literature of the time. It is worth noting that the enmity between the Occident and the Orient goes back to the Middle Ages when the crusades had been waged against the Arab Muslims:

The Western representation of Muslims and Arabs is not a recent fabrication but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims. Down to the Middle Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars and along the Arabs expansion in Europe until the very days of the Third Millennium, the West promotes almost the same stereotypes for Arabs and Muslims. Whether the contact took place in the foregone centuries or it happens recently, the West preserve a persisting conceptualization of the Arabs and Muslims as an alien “Other” or rather “Enemy”, though both the means of communication and ascribing terminologies have known some changes.

(Driss Ridouani, 2011)

Conclusion

It must be concluded that the culture of the American society advocates the notion that the Arab Muslims are inimical and should be eliminated from America. This kind of belief has always been supported by the racist and fanatic writers and media. *Once in a Promised Land* repudiates such a belief as this throughout depicting that the Arab Muslim people living in America that are not to be condemned because of the crimes which they have not committed at all. This novel proves that the Arab Muslim characters have become the victims of the American society and the political system insofar the protagonists of the novel have been expelled from America for crimes which they have nothing to deal with. The novel also proves that the Westerners cannot distinguish the right action from the wrong, and as a result they are to be condemned according to the standards of morality. As such, the powers of evil cannot be eliminated from a society that considers the Right wrong and vice versa. Therefore, there is no place for the good in such a domain as this.

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